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Interview met Karl-G. Prasse

Q: Would you, kindly, introduce yourself to our audience ?

Prof.: I am trained as an Egyptologist in the beginning and I started studying comparative and general linguistics at the university of Copenhagen. After two years time, I changed my study to Egyptology and this language didn't fascinated me a lot. So I started taking up other languages of the same family like Hebrew, Arabic, Ethiopic and Tamazight. They all belong to the same big Hamito-Semitic (Afro-Asiatic) family of languages. Eventually, I passed a " Conference in Egyptology" and became master of arts in that subject.

My thesis for the final examination was about Tamazight nouns. That is how my career as a Berberist started because after that I specialized in Tamazight, it was a very interesting language and studying it, I hoped to be able to add to the comparison of the Hamito-Semitic languages. In 1953 I was for a year in France where I studied with Professor André Basset, who was the leading Berberist at the time, and he gave me a course in "Central Moroccan" and also an introduction to Tuareg; so after I got my Master's degree, I got a scholarship for studying in France and Africa for the first time. That was also the first time, in 1958, I met with Tuareg in the Hoggar, in the oasis of Tamanrasset, and I was able to determine that the phonetic notations of Charles de Foucauld were not quite correct. He was my predecessor in the field, and had written a dictionary of four volumes which was and still is excellent. His definitions of the meanings of Tuareg words are very correct and his dictionary is very complete, but I could see that his phonetic notation, especially of the vowels could not be correct. However at the time I had only three months to start the work and had not got enough money to pay informants. In 1966 I was invited to attend a UNISCO conference in Bamako, Mali, whose aim was to create an alphabet to write six different local languages in the region, including Tamazight (Tuareg). The idea was to unite a group of scholars for these languages to create a common alphabet to write these languages.

Q: All six languages?

Prof.: Yes all six of them, and that is what we did, and that was when I found out what was wrong with Foucauld's notation of Tuareg language. It became clear to me that there was not only one short vowel but two different ones which had been mixed up by Foucauld. Later in the same year of 1966 we were invited to come to Niamey to make a seminar where we were to educate a number of local “alphabétiseurs” in the local languages in order to launch a literacy campaign for teaching adults first and then slowly starting experimental schools for children. These were meant to be bilingual with teaching one of the local languages and French. But it was a great problem that there was not enough money in the system because the UNESCO is a cultural organization and had only money for cultural purposes while what ought to have been done was to combine language teaching with some kind of job-creating programme for people because if they did not get any jobs afterwards, they could not see why they should learn to read and write. – It should be noted that the Tuareg already had their own Alphabet, the so-called tifinagh script whose origin can be traced back to antiquity. They naturally voiced wishes of being taught tifinagh, but this idea was never accepted as the governments involved wanted a common orthography for several languages in Latin characters which were easily

accessible on typewriters and in printing houses. – On the whole, every thing has been going very

slowly, and the experimental schools for children have never passed beyond the stage of being experimental. However, I am still from, time to time, involved in these programmes, writing summaries of my ideas about the right orthography or giving other advice.

There is now an organization in Germany come to Niamey to cooperate with the INDRAP (Institut National de Documenta- tion, de Recherche et d’Animation Pédagogiques) for helping these schools. Their principal job is to help creating and printing school books in Tuareg and other languages and training bilingual teachers. I have proposed to create a school in the Tuareg area where I already support a stockbreeding project with the help

of a Danish NGO called "Genvej til udvikling" (Shortcut to development) located in Jutland. I could not find money for that alone and my NGO has not succeeded either until now, so the project is at a stand still at the moment, but I am still hoping to come through with it.

Q: You might know that the relation between the Arabic language and Tamazight is a complicated relation, historically, politically and also linguistically. There is an ideological school, sponsored by the government of Libya, and claiming to be scientific, which works hard to prove that Tamazight language is old Arabic language. Their head is Dr, Ali Fahmi Khashim, a Libyan linguist. He has written a few books in the field among which a recent one called The Book of Arabic Tamazight and he already has published the first volume, being a dictionary of Tamazight Arabic, with the help of others. Since you are specialized in both languages, do you consider them to be one language as the official Libyan school claims?

Prof.: No, they are certainly not one language but there is a relationship between them. They both belong to the same big family of Hamito-Semitic languages.

Q: Could you give us a comparison in the Indo- European languages to appreciate the difference between Arabic and Tamazight?

Prof.: Yes, any family of languages could be compared to any other as in the case of Indo-European language.

Q: How do you describe the distance between Arabic and Tamazight?

Prof.: The Hamito-Semitic family of languages consists of at least five different branches:

1. The Semitic languages which include Hebrew, Arabic, Ethiopian and old Akkadian languages ("Babylonian and Assyrian") spoken in what is now modern Iraq. These Semitic languages are very close to each other. You could almost find again any word of one language in the others as well, but when you come to the other branches then the situation changes. Thus only a few Tamazight words can be identified with words in the Semitic languages.

2. The old Egyptian language with its final stage Coptic which they still try to use in the Coptic Church. They say there were people still speaking Coptic 200 years ago in southern Egypt.

3. The Tamazight (or Berber) language which falls into three branches at least, Tuareg being one of these.

4. The fourth branch of this family is the Cushitic languages of Ethiopia (Abyssinia) the most well known of which is the Somali language. The biggest of them is however Oromo (or Galla as the Ethiopians call it). There are around 20 millions speakers of Oromo at least, which makes it the third language of Africa. Only Swahili and Hausa are bigger.

5. The fifth branch is the Chadic languages in West Africa and the best known of this family is Hausa, which is a very big language. It is a kind of international language used for commercial purposes and spoken by at least 35 millions. There are 140 languages under the Chadic branch, but most of them are spoken by just a few hundred or thousand people.

All these languages have a close relationship in the grammatical system and the phonetic system but between the different branches, as I said, there are not many similarities in the vocabulary. There are about 300 Tamazight

words that could be found again in the other branches of Hamito-Semitic, for instance in Arabic. So most of the Arabic words you find in Tamazight are later loan words. But nevertheless this relationship means that at a very remote time these languages were all one common language, which we call "Proto- Hamito-Semitic" so of course there is a relationship, not between

Arabic and Berber particularly but between Berber and Semitic in general. Likewise the Semitic languages alone can be supposed to have been one language at a remote time which we can reconstruct as Proto-Semitic. In fact one has tried to reconstruct such a Proto- Language with much success and we are trying to do the same with Tamaizght but in the case of Tamazight the progress is not very advanced yet. There is still very much to do, but off course you can reconstruct the Proto-Berber language and the Proto-Chadic language as well. And all these proto-languages could again be pooled to give one Proto-Hamito- Semitic Language, spoken at an even more remote time.

That is exactly the same as the situation we have in Indo-European languages, where it also falls into different branches. You have the Indian Languages like Hindustani, Ordo, which is very infected with Arabic, loaned words because they are Muslims. Then there are the Iranian Branch, Slavic branch with Russian, Bulgarian, Polish, Serbo-corati and then the Roman languages like French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian in this last case where we still now the original ancestors which was Latin so that was the Proto- language of the Roman languages.

Q: As I understand that Tamazight and Arabic derive from the same Hamito-Semitic Proto-Language, so Berber is not a daughter of the Arabic language but a sister language, isn't that true? Or in other words is Tamazight a daughter or a sister of Arabic?

Prof.: No, you cannot really say it is a sister language of Arabic. It is a sister language of Semitic in general because when Arabic came into being Tamazight was already long ago an independent language.

Q: Do you mean that the Tamazight language is much older than Arabic?

Prof.: Yes, probably.

Q: There are talks about Berbers, which say they came from the land of Yemen and brought their language with them from the Arabic area?

Prof.: Well, all of this is only hypotheses. This has something to do with the question of where did the common proto Hamito-Semitic people really live. I think most people believe that it must have been near the southern Caucasus in the area between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea and south of that. But there are people who have proposed that the original home of these peoples was in south Arabia or even in Africa, in Abyssinia or the Central Sahara, but personally I am sceptical about that.

Q: There are three ways of writing Tamazight now: with Latin, Arabic, and Tifinagh scripts and there are a lot of arguments although almost all Amzigh intellectual use Latin characters due to scientific and realistic reasons. But it is argued that this is because the Berbers were influenced by France and have become francophone and that one must fear that might affect learning the Quran In the future. But scientifically, which system of writing suits the Tamazight language best in your opinion?

Prof.: The most practical thing to do is to adapt the Latin alphabet, because in the Latin Alphabet we have developed a lot of special letters to write a lot of different languages and this has never done in Arabic. You have a few special letters for writing Persian and Afghani and so, but in general you don't have the great variety of different consonantal signs which are necessary to be able to write Tamazight and when you come to writing Tuareg the problem is how to write the vowels, because in Arabic you can only practice writing three different long vowels while usually you do not write the short ones. In Tuareg you have seven vowels, five long ones and two short ones, so how are you going to write them in the Arabic Alphabet?

You may know that Arabic in the first stages of the language, did not even write the long vowels. Of course if you have a good knowledge of the grammatical system you can guess the vowels more or less, but there have always been uncertainties when you read an Arabic text. In Tamazight this problems would be even greater. So if you really want to make Arabic fit to

write Tamazight without ambiguities, you must create more signs to add to the Alphabet.

Q: Don't you think that Tifinagh can be used to write Tamazight?

Prof.: It is the same problem: you would have to create at least seven vowels signs to add to the script.

Q: But the Tuareg have been using Tifinagh to write their language for a very long time!

Prof.: Yes, but I do not know if you are aware how it works with them. It is very difficult to use. They use it only for very short inscriptions on weapons and jewels or for short messages and they are in reality unable to read longer texts. It is a very painful operation for them to read a longer text. They must spell and spell until they get the meaning and this cannot be ideal for an efficient script.

Q: But do you mean that there is no problem in writing with Latin characters?

Prof.: Well, in so far as the necessary letters have been created already long ago, the problem is of a very limited nature. We use them about every day for phonetic transcriptions as well as in the different modern languages. You know that French has its accents. You have the Umlaut-letters in German, three vowels which you write with two dots over them. You do the same with Swedish; in Danish we have created special letters like æ and ø.

And then of course there is a practical question, if you should write in Tifinagh, you would have to create typewriters and printing fonts which have the necessary characters and that is very expensive

to do. Indeed everything has become easier nowadays because we can use computers to create these letters, but still it is a bit of a problem to make several alphabets work together on a computer. Indeed I could create my

own personal alphabet on my computer if I wanted to, an Alphabet, which no one could read.

Q: In the Tamazight language today there is a problem of dialect differences, of pronouncing some words differently. How would you go into solving such problems especially with Latin characters?

Prof.: Well, it's not a problem of scripts. it's a problem of creating a common language. If you want to overcome the dialectal differences, you would have to create a standard Tamazight language somehow and that has nothing to do with writing it.

Q: Has Tamazight affected the local Arabic dialects in the North African countries?

Prof.: Certainly, especially in Morocco and Algeria, because the Tamazight dialect of those regions have a very reduced vowel system with in reality only 3 vowels. All the short vowels have

disappeared. I think the Berber influence is the reason why the Maghribine Arabic dialects also have very reduced vowel systems compared with Standard Arabic. And then of course certain Berber words

have passed into local Arabic as loan words, although it is much more frequently the other way round.

Q: There is indeed an initiative to standardize the Tamazight language for teaching purposes under all its dialects. What are your comments?

Prof.: Yes, it's very well possible to standardize it, but it will take time, efforts and cost a lot of money, because it must be done properly by scholars and of course the time to make such a language before you get people to adopt it.

Q: When you say a long time what do mean by that?

Prof.: A generation at least.

Q: I suppose the same had been the case with Danish, English, French...all those languages...

Prof.: Of course.

Q: There is an identity question in North Africa, is this something related to the languages used?

Prof.: Well, Imazighen must be allowed to cultivate their own language, that is clear. For example in Morocco more than half of the population are Imazighen so you can not just take their identity away from them.

Q: But nevertheless these countries are considered Arabic countries, they are mentioned as being Arabic countries ... it is a big question

Prof.: But one could not call them Berber countries, could one?... They have first of all the Islamic religion in common.

Q: Is there any influence from the European languages on the Tamazight language in North Africa?

Prof.: There are of course a lot of loan words from European languages, especially French, in Berber. But there is no genetic relationship between them and there were no contacts long enough to influence the structure of Berber.

Q: In the last Algerian Constitution 1996, the Algerian national identity is defined as having three dimensions: Islam, Arabic and Tamazight, while the Moroccans failed to do something similar in the last referendum... in Libya, for example, on the pages of the Internet there are a lot of discussions about who the Libyans are. Are they Arabs and who are the Arabs... Many questions are raised about identity and us. Some Imazighen think that a Tamazight dimension should be included in the Libyan identity. Most of Imazighen believe that we are rather Africans or Mediterraneans than Asians while many Arabs feel that they are rather Asians ...

Prof.: ...First off all one believes that the Berber language and the modern Berbers must have come from the east at a very remote moment in the past. That was perhaps 8000 years before our era, 10000 years ago. That is when one can first see Neolithic stone industries and so which resemble what you have in the Middle East.

Q: But the Europeans have also come from the east!

Prof.: Yes, indeed... We all came from Africa in the end... but considering modern times, we must say that the Arabs which invaded North Africa constitute, perhaps, only 10% of the population. All others who speak Arabic are Arabized Berbers.

Q: In your opinion, why have the Arabs succeeded in inducing Imazighen to speak Arabic where others have failed to do so, like Romans, Turks...etc.?

Prof.: Well, the Arabs brought Islam with them and could convince other people that Arabic was and is God's own holy language. So Arabic has a special prestige among Muslims, but apart from that the Arabization was a slow process which lasted for hundreds of years. In some other countries like Turkey and Iran the Arabs were less successful, while the Egyptians gave up their Coptic language even more completely than the Berbers gave up their's.

Q: Imazighen in Libya today are preparing themselves to establish a system to educate their children if they have the chance in the future to implement it. What do you think of that idea?

Prof.: Well, only the Libyan government itself can do that. If the Libyan government allows implementing such programmes, then the problem is solved.

Q: Why did you make your Tuareg your specialty and what are your most recent publications and books?

Prof.: Well, I specialized in Tuareg because it was very convenient for comparison with other languages of the Hamito-Semitic family. It has preserved many more authentic Berber words than the northern Imazighen and its phonetic system is more old fashioned. I have published many books about Tamazight, especially about Tuareg. One work contains a collection of Tuareg poems in two volumes, another a complete grammar of Algerian Tuareg in three volumes. As for Libyan Tamazight, only a few scholars have written about it, and most of these were Italians.

At the end, we thank you all for spending your time on this interview.